

## Some key points from the pope's Apostolic Exhortation



To absorb quickly the key points in what is a 47,500 word document, [ucanews.com](http://ucanews.com) highlights some significant sections in the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

This exhortation is sweeping, bold and programmatic. Its status is not that of an encyclical but an apostolic exhortation, which may be deliberate. Pope Paul VI never wrote another encyclical after *Humanae Vitae* (in 1968) was widely disputed, preferring instead to write in a less authoritative way so as to invite and persuade, rather than direct and command. The encyclical pattern was resumed by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

**Nonetheless, this is clearly a blueprint for his pontificate.**

Decentralization of Church governance is the most dramatic innovation, especially the pope's call to give more juridical power to bishops' conferences. This seems to overturn the earlier approach favored in the Vatican and outlined in Pope John Paul's *Apostolos Suos*. Pope Francis is calling for a re-examination of customs, rules and precepts that have had significant influence in Church governance and operation.

**With that as background, here is our selection of key points:**

16. Countless issues involving evangelization today might be discussed here, but I have chosen not to explore these many questions which call for further reflection and study. Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in

the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound “decentralization”.

25. I am aware that nowadays documents do not arouse the same interest as in the past and that they are quickly forgotten. Nevertheless, I want to emphasize that what I am trying to express here has a programmatic significance and important consequences. I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. “Mere administration” can no longer be enough.[21] Throughout the world, let us be “permanently in a state of mission”. [22]

The papacy and the central structures of the universal Church also need to hear the call to pastoral conversion. The Second Vatican Council stated that, like the ancient patriarchal Churches, episcopal conferences are in a position “to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit”. [36] Yet this desire has not been fully realized, since a juridical status of episcopal conferences which would see them as subjects of specific attributions, including genuine doctrinal authority, has not yet been sufficiently elaborated. [37] Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach.

43. In her ongoing discernment, the Church can also come to see that certain customs not directly connected to the heart of the Gospel, even some which have deep historical roots, are no longer properly understood and appreciated. Some of these customs may be beautiful, but they no longer serve as means of communicating the Gospel. We should not be afraid to re-examine them. At the same time, the Church has rules or precepts which may have been quite effective in their time, but no longer have the same usefulness for directing and shaping people’s lives. Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed out that the precepts which Christ and the apostles gave to the people of God “are very few”. [47] Citing Saint Augustine, he noted that the precepts subsequently enjoined by the Church should be insisted upon with moderation “so as not to burden the lives of the faithful” and make our religion a form of servitude, whereas “God’s mercy has willed that we should be free”. [48] This warning, issued many centuries ago, is most timely today. It ought to be one of the criteria to be taken into account in considering a the reform of the Church and her preaching which would enable it to reach everyone.

47. The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open. One concrete sign of such openness is that our church doors should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door. There are other doors that should not be closed either. Everyone can share in some way in the life of the Church; everyone can be part of the community, nor should the doors of the sacraments be closed for simply any reason. This is especially true of the sacrament which is itself “the door”: baptism. The Eucharist, although it is the

fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.[51] These convictions have pastoral consequences that we are called to consider with prudence and boldness. Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.

104. The reservation of the priesthood to males, as a sign of Christ the Spouse who gives himself in the Eucharist, is not a question open to discussion, but it can prove especially divisive if sacramental power is too closely identified with power in general. It must be remembered that when we speak of sacramental power “we are in the realm of function, not that of dignity or holiness”.<sup>[73]</sup> The ministerial priesthood is one means employed by Jesus for the service of his people, yet our great dignity derives from baptism, which is accessible to all. The configuration of the priest to Christ the head – namely, as the principal source of grace – does not imply an exaltation which would set him above others. In the Church, functions “do not favour the superiority of some vis-à-vis the others”.<sup>[74]</sup> Indeed, a woman, Mary, is more important than the bishops. Even when the function of ministerial priesthood is considered “hierarchical”, it must be remembered that “it is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ’s members”.<sup>[75]</sup> Its key and axis is not power understood as domination, but the power to administer the sacrament of the Eucharist; this is the origin of its authority, which is always a service to God’s people. This presents a great challenge for pastors and theologians, who are in a position to recognize more fully what this entails with regard to the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church’s life.

118. The Bishops of Oceania asked that the Church “develop an understanding and a presentation of the truth of Christ working from the traditions and cultures of the region” and invited “all missionaries to work in harmony with indigenous Christians so as to ensure that the faith and the life of the Church be expressed in legitimate forms appropriate for each culture”.<sup>[94]</sup> We cannot demand that peoples of every continent, in expressing their Christian faith, imitate modes of expression which European nations developed at a particular moment of their history, because the faith cannot be constricted to the limits of understanding and expression of any one culture.<sup>[95]</sup> It is an indisputable fact that no single culture can exhaust the mystery of our redemption in Christ.

143. The challenge of an inculturated preaching consists in proclaiming a synthesis, not ideas or detached values. Where your synthesis is, there lies your heart. The difference between enlightening people with a synthesis and doing so with detached ideas is like the difference between boredom and heartfelt fervour. The preacher has the wonderful but difficult task of joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people. The dialogue between God and his people further strengthens the covenant between them and consolidates the bond of charity. In the course of the homily, the hearts of believers keep silence and allow God to speak. The Lord and his people speak to one another in a thousand ways directly, without intermediaries. But in the homily they want someone to serve as an instrument and to express their feelings in such a way that afterwards, each one may chose how he or she will continue

the conversation. The word is essentially a mediator and requires not just the two who dialogue but also an intermediary who presents it for what it is, out of the conviction that “what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4:5).

154. The preacher also needs to keep his ear to the people and to discover what it is that the faithful need to hear. A preacher has to contemplate the word, but he also has to contemplate his people. In this way he learns “of the aspirations, of riches and limitations, of ways of praying, of loving, of looking at life and the world, which distinguish this or that human gathering,” while paying attention “to actual people, to using their language, their signs and symbols, to answering the questions they ask”.[120] He needs to be able to link the message of a biblical text to a human situation, to an experience which cries out for the light of God’s word. This interest has nothing to do with shrewdness or calculation; it is profoundly religious and pastoral. Fundamentally it is a “spiritual sensitivity for reading God’s message in events”,[121] and this is much more than simply finding something interesting to say. What we are looking for is “what the Lord has to say in this or that particular circumstance”.[122] Preparation for preaching thus becomes an exercise in evangelical discernment, wherein we strive to recognize – in the light of the Spirit – “a call which God causes to resound in the historical situation itself. In this situation, and also through it, God calls the believer.”[123]

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